Separating incentives and ideology in terrorism

Shapiro's book offers theoretical insight into the working of covert organizations that removes many cobwebs that cloud our understanding of the phenomenon

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On 28 December 1994, Gopalaswamy Mahendraraja, also known as Mahattaya, the leader of the political wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was killed. Mahattaya was executed on the explicit orders of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran allegedly for leaking secrets to India. At least that was the explanation widely circulated. But there are other competing explanations as well. A plausible one being that Prabhakaran was wary of Mahattaya's growing influence within LTTE and saw him as a threat to his supremacy.

This was not a solitary instance of Prabhakaran's aggressive efforts to wipe out insubordination, imaginary or real. Over the years LTTE mutated from an organization fighting for a Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka to one man's obsession with maintaining authority, irrespective of the cost.

When Prabhakaran was finally hunted down and killed by the Sri Lankan army in 2009, his core group was no larger than 250 loyalists. His urge to retain control at any cost ultimately led to his trusted lieutenants deserting him and some, such as Karuna, actually went on to help the Sri Lankan army in the war against LTTE.

The LTTE's story is an interesting example of how terrorist organizations originate, rise and demise. Very few ever achieve the political goals with which they are set up. It is usual to explain these dynamics in terms of ideologies and counter-ideologies working against such groups. The trouble is ideology cannot explain the day-to-day behaviour, motivations and choices of these groups. As in any other domain of human activity, there are rational explanations that do a better job at understanding these organizations. Jacob N. Shapiro's book *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* is a fine example of this approach.

At the heart of Shapiro's model is the "security-control" trade off. What is the optimum level of control a terrorist organization's leader can exercise to maintain authority without letting security risks creep in? His contention is that focusing on "mundane" details such as how terrorist outfits function, how they manage expenses, and what causes friction within them would make planning counter-terrorism operations easier. The obverse of control, decentralization, has its own problems. For example, all terrorist organizations have their own theory of the link between political objectives and the use of violence to attain them. If any leader loosens control, he risks making this link tenuous to the point of wiping it out totally. Is there an optimal level of control and decentralization? Shapiro's model can be used to understand two contrasting examples from India—the Indian Mujahideen (IM) and the Maoists groups operating in east central India.

The IM's leadership is based out of India while its operations target India. The IM's control vs security dilemma is acute. Rationally, its political objectives can be nothing more than vengeance against citizens and the state in India for some real or imagined grievances. Thus, even to begin with, the link between its use of violence and its objectives is unclear. If in this situation, its leadership allows its operatives to do as they please, the nature of the violence they unleash will be more anarchic than politically useful. On the face of its, the IM's attacks against places frequented by western tourists (in Pune) and Buddhist pilgrims (in Bodh Gaya) is linked to vengeance. Its violence is more diffuse and harder to control. It seeks to do no more.

This is in contrast to Maoist groups, which have found a measure of success in meeting their goals. Large parts of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal are completely under their control. The leadership and the operatives are localized. The link between their political objectives and violence is, relatively speaking, far tighter than in IM's case. But this has its costs. With control come dangers of counter-terrorism strategies. In contrast to the IM, India has had far greater success in taming the Maoists. This is not only because

the Maoist leaders are located in India but also due to the dilemmas and problems in effecting control that Shapiro highlights.

Terrorism in all its manifestations is a complex problem. A level-headed, clear approach is crucial for tackling it. Shapiro's book offers theoretical insight into the working of covert organizations that removes many cobwebs that cloud our understanding of the phenomenon.